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RE-BORN YOUTH

I have just laid down a book which has completely abstracted me for a blessed time from a world torn with conflicting emotions of vengeance and justice toward a vanquished enemy; a book which has made me forget fascinating airplane flights across the seas, forget that such words as "proletariat" and "bourgeoisie" exist, forget even the luxury and income taxes to which I have lately been painfully supersensitive. I have been a boy again. Once more I have walked with fearful step through murky forest shades which my fancy peopled with lurking panthers, monstrous bears, and the savage, grinning faces of a still more frightful enemy—the American Indian. I have shot many a foreboding, sidelong glance over my shoulder, in imminent expectation of eying some malignant aborigine of those crepuscular regions leering at me, his intended victim, with ogreish ecstasy. I have once again heard the spiteful crack of the musket, the awful whiz of the tomahawk, and the appalling, terrific warwhoop; and I have seen ruined log cabins surrounded by these same horridly painted, howling savages, sending their missiles of death hurtling toward the little band of whites who, fighting against prodigious odds, were striving to defend the hapless, shrinking maidens ("females," rather) within, whose golden ringlets the diabolical besiegers were burning to tear away with their bloody scalping-knives. And finally, I have seen this brave little band rescued, contrary to all the laws of probability and literary criticism, from their direful situation, while pitiless justice was meted out to their would-be murderers, whose "corse" now strew the ground. For I have just finished reading *Nick of the Woods*, Robert Montgomery Bird's tale of frontier life in Kentucky during the seventeen hundred and eighties.

And I have not been at all worried by the fact that, as a writer of various tragedies and romances once quite popular, Bird has been almost forgotten. Even this novel is unknown to the American boy of to-day, who is perforce compelled to satiate his hunger for the raw, juicy beef which such stories as this would feed him upon, with the dry husks of Horatio Algerian

tales, which narrate the jejune "adventures" of perfectly respectable Boy Scouts who, in lieu of a mother's apron-strings, are hitched to those of the eminently proper and wofully unromantic Y. M. C. A. Pitying these boys, as I do, because of the insipid juvenile literature of the day, I am constrained to advise all lads in their early teens, who have a healthily pagan love for adventures which are gory to the n^{th} degree, that their desire will be amply gratified if they will buy, beg, borrow or steal a copy of this same *Nick of the Woods*.

In all fairness, I must reluctantly admit that the evil spirit of critical research, who has relentlessly dogged me through some years of graduate study and the teaching of English, has ever been at my elbow and has given me many an unwelcome nudge of dutiful remembrance. He has frequently warned me that my time might much better be employed in tracing "influences," "effects of environment," "character development," "structural considerations," and so on, *ad nauseam*. This same admonitory devil has whispered many of his poisonous suggestions in my ear: he has reminded me that no heroine or hero could possibly be so impeccably heroic and hence so painfully colorless as are Roland and Edith Forrester in this story; that the amorous conversations of this same love-lorn pair are indeed fearfully and wonderfully deficient in verisimilitude; that by no possibility could all the chief characters come almost unscathed through such tremendous difficulties and dangers as beset them on every hand; that such large numbers of dastardly reprobates could never have suffered such uniformly condign punishment; that, in short, the whole story is a veritable labyrinth of absurdities. But for once every barbaric instinct in me rose and triumphantly put to flight this pestering imp, and I banished, temporarily at least, every literary consideration from my mind, almost as successfully (a twinge administered by the returning fiend prompts me to state) as virtue banishes vice in the story. "Avaunt, wretch!" quoth I to this demon of critical adjuration, emulating the dialogue of the story, "get thee hence to the hellish lair whence thou camest, and suffer me to pursue my course free from thy baleful pursuit." And forthwith he avaunted—for a time.

The boy who reads this tale will not have his interest diverted from the narrative by long historical or scenic descriptions quite as frequently as he will in reading Cooper, though he may occasionally yield to the perfectly proper temptation of skipping a few paragraphs. Neither will he find here any such heroic Indian figures as Uncas or Chingachgook, whose virtues he can idealize to gigantic proportions. For Bird has portrayed, it is to be suspected, Indians much more like those who actually existed in the primeval forests of America than did the bluff, sturdily independent, democracy-hating creator of the Leatherstocking Tales. Here the redskin is shown as a creature perpetually rent with ferocious and untamable passions, waging relentless warfare against the conquering whites, neither giving nor demanding quarter, slaughtering babes with as much infernal glee as he slaughters seasoned warriors, and almost completely lacking in any emotional or intellectual refinement. "Such is the red-man of America, whom . . . the dreams of poets and sentimentalists have invested with a character wholly incompatible with his condition."

The chief figure of the story, Nathan Slaughter, or "Nick of the Woods," is a characterization showing no inconsiderable creative power. He has seen his wife and children heinously massacred before his own eyes; he has himself been scalped and his skull has been fractured; but his superb physique has enabled him to survive these terrible ordeals and, hiding his real nature under the guise of a harmless, pacifistic Quaker, he pursues his implacably remorseless way through the book, striking down Indians to the right and left as he goes, stripping off their scalps with pardonably malicious satisfaction, and leaving his "nick" in the shape of a cross hacked on the breasts of his victims. I must not forget to speak a word of affection for Peter, the little dog which is ever to be seen at Nathan's side, and which saves his master's life in several delightfully impossible ways. "Roaring" Ralph Stackpole, horse-thief and Arthurian hero all in one, who perpetually invokes "tarnal death" upon himself unless the "angelliferous" heroine is rescued from the jaws of destruction that enclose her through three-fourths of the story, deserves the hearty and unstinted admiration of every red-blooded boy.

And so I repeat that, for a few precious hours, I have been a boy again, worshipping physical valor, listening with charmed ears to the ringing crack of rifles, and seeing with unlimited pleasure blood flow from tawny breasts or trickle from ghastly scalp-locks. I have been docilely complacent, not to say grimly satisfied, upon seeing two villains suffer forms of death scarcely more horrible than I could wish to be the fate of any meticulously flaw-seeking, influence-hunting, comparison-and-contrast-making, insufferably disillusioning critics who would find fault with this story. If such there be, may the avenging spirit of the hero himself rise, and may he stalk, capture, and immolate them with as little compunction as he did the fiendish denizens of the Kentucky wilderness one hundred and forty years ago!

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